

Arsonist: 1979.

WARNING – you may need a strong stomach for this one. Don't read it if you're feeling a bit too dainty, or like a fart in a colander. True story.

I had a bone to pick, and a big, fat, Yorkshire, lard fried chip on me shoulder when I were a lad. An eleven year old lad in this nugget of memory. I never told any cunt about this for years. Proper blew my own self away with the indelible vision I'd created.

I'd love to say that I'd thought it out, and was making some sort of direct action statement on the industrialised mistreatment of animals, but I was a thoughtless carnivore, and just sort of did it on autopilot.

It woulda bin 1979, in the summer. Where I grew up were in the strange and unpredictable buffer zone of Wheatley, Doncaster – long, Beckett Road, separating Donny town centre from deep, dark, Donny proper – and the pit villages like Armthorpe and Markham Main Colliery.

We had it all. From the mouldering, sash windowed, three or four storied Victorian town houses of Kings Rd, Queens Rd, St Marys Rd through Avenue Rd. Long, wide and arboreal, opposite my middle school, where Mrs Pennington taught me the Greek classics, and Marcus Aurelius, and history opened me up by pondering on the shit they WEREN'T telling us.

The avenues were, by the 70's, an uneasy mix of brothels, seedy guest houses filled with secrets swept under every, greasy rug, and the rare, well kept properties owned by a single family who could actually afford to BE there legit. And round "Cemetery Gates", off Christchurch Rd, which was the clubhouse of Rigour Mortis MC, outlaw bike club, where I smoked my first hot knives, and we'd get sent on errands. Anyway I digress. That's the part real close to the town centre. All bedsits and old people's homes now. My mum's in one.

Where I'm from is a couple of miles further on into Wheatley. Left off Beckett Rd. Ruler straight, cloned streets, built in the 1920's, where my grandad Saviel had purchased it new for like, £200 or something, and where my Dad, John, was born in the house, in the room which would be his bedroom as a man, when he started making payments, and bought the house off his old man. Number 11. Same number as his birthdate in June. So, there we resided. Me and my brother Michael. Adopted into their blank canvass in 1966 and 1968 respectively. I was born 4th of April '68, the day they decided to assassinate Dr Martin Luther King Jnr, over the pond. Shouldn't have done that should they? But it meant I understood the UB40 song, King, when no-one else seemed to.

Mate, I'm neurodivergent and proud. I get side tracked for England, as memories seed and sprout like the zillion Dandelions, reppin nature, up through the warped, flagstones and cracked tarmac of Wheatley. So you can shut up. If I'm boring ya, go an ave a row with Danny Dyer on Twitter or something.

So our home turf roads, were sandwiched between Beckett Rd on the one side, and the much busier, dual carriageway of Wheatley Hall Rd on the other. That were where the smelly, and I do mean smelly, heavy industry, sprawled, dotted with clumps of ragged, unhealthy looking woodland copses replete with World War Two machine gun nests, and the spigots they used to rest anti-tank mortars on, where we used to play until discovered by whatever factories' security who'd kick off at us and make threats as we ran back through the holes in rusting wire fences which were our portals to the only things to do and the only places to play, unobserved by coppers and curtain twitchers.

There was Prosper De Mulder's Animal Rendering Plant for one. A gigantic complex where basically anything dead and not human, was dropped off in fleets of trucks of rotting flesh, and dumped into various buildings, where it would be processed into bonemeal, fertilizer and the manifest temple of Beelzebub, Lord of The Flies, himself – the fucking maggot farm, churning out big chubby wrigglers, exuding more ammonia than a Welsh, base speed factory, for selling in fishing tackle shops as bait,

sold by the pint. I worked a Saturday job, underage, for a famous 1970's wrestler, real name Tony Gail, at his fishing tackle shop, "riddling" maggots on a giant diesel driven machine, sorting them into three different sizes. Then I had to dye them three different colours with cancer causing crysedene dyes, red, gold or green, depending on the larvae being emulated. Rastamaggots. I used to push them through the bunghole of clear, plastic, bauble fishing floats and hang them on cheap, earring hooks to sell at the park or at Wheatley Hills and Clay Lane youth clubs to the punks and just weird kids who defied any of the usual, youth tribe definitions. The exploited maggots would wriggle round their plastic, showcase homes for longer than you'd expect, all brightly coloured, and great to trip off, when you'd been on the glue, before meeting their maker and turning swiftly into compost. We even tried pushing bits of rank food in, and leaving the tiny. Rubber plugs out, for airflow like, but the fuckers would escape and go down someone's neck. There's a whole, mad story about extorting money out of the wanna be paedo wrestler, fishing tackle shop owner, for trying it on heavily with my underage girlfriend, but it would take ages to tell so I'll do it later. A hint – his wrestler name was Mick Mc something. Used to be on the same bills as Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks. Remember?

So, the maggot farm, fuck. How they farm maggots is by having an enormous, stainless steel, swimming pool sized thing, which they dump loads of rotting carcasses into, before releasing specially reared legions of big, fat, fucking flies which they've had going through the cocoon stage to full maturity. Climbing out of their little, brown sleeping bags, letting their wrinkly wings dry out, and thinking wahey! As they follow their olfactory senses to the sea of rancid, putrefying, animal detritus in the tub.

They wriggle and squiggle, and they gorge themselves on every fucking thing, except for the polished bone and hard cartilage, which get ground down to bonemeal. My Dad, God rest his soul, told us a story as kids, me, my brother and our mates, that in the early seventies, when he was installing a lamp rig high above the maggot tub, with a fellow sparkie by the name of Wilf, they had a cow in the mix that'd been floating in the

canal long enough to make soup. The cow was hugely distended and bloated out – a regular occurrence – and the rubber suited, maggot men, milling around in their gas mask looking things they wore, not to puke, had long, wooden poles with barbed spikes on the end, to burst ballooned out cadavers with. My dad and Wilf also had these face masks on, as they crawled about on some sort of catwalk I suppose, rigging the big, heat lamps which speed up the putrefaction. Now, for some reason, old Wilf had either removed or was readjusting his breathing apparatus – I always pictured it as a plague doctor's beak fulla posies of sweet herbs, but of course it wouldn't have been – and they burst the cow right underneath the poor fucker. An apparently visible cloud, which my ten year old imagination pictured as mustard gas, rises slowly up and engulfs the well underpaid electrical contractors up in the heavens. My Dad was alright, but Wilf took in a lungful or two and keeled over, plummeting from on high straight down into the several feet deep sea of highly animated, fly babies!

So, basically, the little off-white bastards sucked him under, and he had the ignominious end of drowning in maggots. His son was in my year at school. Everyone used to take the piss out of him. His reputation followed him right up to Danum Comprehensive, where our cursory educations terminated during the Miner's Strike. He were a nice lad. Seemed to take it all in his stride after middle school tears. Were a bit of an outsider though. He turned me onto the Joy Division before anyone else had brought em up. He leant me his album to listen to, long before I could tape stuff. I lost it somehow, after treasuring it like the fucking Mona Lisa. I think I left it at some lassies house when I was on the sniff. I feel more guilty about that than the massive crime I'm about to share with you. I have some standards, so shut up.

So, by De Mulder's Animal Rendering Plant – which would engulf the whole of Wheatley, by the way, in a cloud of fetid, rotting, stench, several times a year when the wind would change just right. Completely inescapable and everyone would comment on it to one another, in a defeated, matter of fact, sighing sort of way – right there next door to it was the abattoir.

Fleets of trucks crammed with bovine, death row inmates would roll in, and from nearby you could hear all the shouting and cajoling, and sounds coming from big, beefy lungs. They'd be herding into a big long building, motors would whirr, and after a while all would go quiet, until more trucks, big, white freezer type of things, would arrive at the other side for the irrevocably changed creatures, now shadows of their former selves.

All the factory buildings backed onto a wide canal which ran along the back and was full of shopping trolleys, stolen bikes and white goods and kicked in TV's, shit like that. There was literally a massive metal pipe which jutted out over the river of filth, which pumped out blood and detritus and rinsing down water from the abattoir, gore with a tinge of bleach or some such shit, and it would simply pour into the general mire, which always seemed to have that rainbow, spectrum-splitting effect floating on the top, like you get when petrol contaminates a puddle of rain in a pothole.

It's so weird now to think how normalised this was for us, and how we'd often sit in groups under the little concrete bridge, and take turns to dare climbing over "pipe bridge", a huge, metal inverted U shaped construction, which carried God knows what to God knows where. Sometimes kids fell in, but I never saw one. I think I wanted to, I'm not sure. I never tried, just lied that I had. I was smart.

So, one Sunday after dinner, when there was nobody out to play but me, I went wandering aimlessly off in that direction, ending up in the now empty, huge truck parking area beside the hideous meat factory, and for the first time, consciously at least, I spied a great big, steel, riveted rectangle on a big wooden frame, right in the back corner. It had a pump handle, with a squeeze action trigger, like you get at petrol stations. Without a single thought of intent going through my head, and without so much as glancing around to see if anyone was in the vicinity, I plucked the thing from it's holder, found it was unlocked, and squeezed til just a fair trickle of what I identified as diesel, like I'd seen when my Dad had jobs on the farms, had squirted onto the pock marked, ancient concrete floor at my feet. I wasn't greedy. Then I saw an old, fuel soaked rag, tucked into the

framework. I soaked it with a tad more fuel and pushed it into the end of the pump nozzle, which I laid out on the floor, in my creation, in my petrochemical puddle which hadn't been there, being a liability, before I'd arrived. Then I got out my matches. Swan vestas. I pretty much always had matches in those days. The catalysts to many a fool's errand. But not on this scale.

Completely absent mindedly, I struck up a bunch of matches and held them against the rag until it took hold. The flame when it caught seemed paltry and insignificant. I just left it flickering, and headed back into Wheatley without a second thought. Didn't even look back. I hadn't really twigged that I could be the agent of massive change and disruption with physical acts by this point. I knew I could with my mouth, but not with my hands.

I have no memory of where I went or what I did over the next couple of hours, but I know I didn't tell anyone about the pyrotechnics experiment. I had put it far to the back of my mind, well away from conscious evaluation. The plot, however, had indeed thickened.

I found myself outside, a couple of streets away, on our side of Wheatley Hall Rd, when I realised that a truly vast, black, pall of smoke, tinged with red and sparks at the horizon line, was doing it's best to turn day into night in the middle of a Sunday afternoon in Wheatley. A vast Rorschach test in the sky, and it was slowly drifting my way. I legged it down the alleys and over to it's source, in the truck park where I'd loitered and played, like little boys do, without malice aforethought, at least knowingly. There were what seemed like every fucking fire engine in Yorkshire in attendance, big, burly firemen running about, two road blocks of cop cars, stopping and re-routing traffic in both directions, and I remember a few minutes of being mesmerised by the great array of colourful lights, spinning around like a fairground. Nothing ever happened to see round our way, except fights outside the pubs, and firing fireworks at cop cars on mischievous night.

There was quite a crowd gathering by now, mainly the thick, inbred looking grown ups we used to call "mouth breathers", cos they did, always had their gobs open, looking perplexed. I asked some kid what was

happening and he told me to fuck off. I asked another kid and he said someone had burnt down the diesel tank at the abattoir. Some old codger in a tank top and slippers turned to us and said excitedly, barely hiding his obvious glee – “it’s five thousand gallons that is!” - and turned back to gawp and mouth breathe at the monumental spectacle.

It was then! And only then, I swear! The penny dropped and I realised that it’d been me who was the culprit! All that fucking hoo-hah, and I’d done it, and I realised in an instant how much animosity I harboured towards that grotesque institution by which, along with the maggot farm, the canal, the fucking works, had blighted my childhood with it’s ugliness, and I wandered off and pondered on the kids I knew whose Dad’s worked there, and how maladjusted and psycho many of them were, with their veiny faces like trimmed sides of beef, and who ate too much cheap, stolen meat that their mams were always trying to flog off on the sly, and how their toothless grandparents sucked on tripe and chitlings, and I was not sorry. Not one bit. I’m still not. I’m just eternally grateful that they never had CCTV in them days. Otherwise I’d have been fucked. Very. A naughty little arsonist in borstal.